

"But—" remonstrated Bertha.

"But nothing!" snapped Dolly joyfully. "Fifteen cents for Peter's chocolates—twenty for the show. I'm taking dinner at your house—you're taking dinner at mine. Man in the drug store'll trust us for two phones. Come along."

They phoned.

No mention has been made of either Mr. Merrit or Mr. Wilcox, but they existed. Salaried men both, seeing their families mainly in the evening and on Sundays, their acquaintance with their girls was of that superficial nature which regards charming growing girls as a growing expense to be borne in the nature of things. Not that either Dolly or Bertha had anything to complain of in their fathers; the men were proud of them, indulged them, left it to their wives to overcome their indulgence by motherly discipline. The girls were bright spots in their dull routine existence.

The Wilcoxs and the Merrits might be designated as the aristocrats of a neighborhood anything but aristocratic—they owned their own homes, three blocks apart. They had seen Park Place grow from a pleasant, forested suburban tract to the wilderness of flats that it is; had seen the city reach out and absorb it; had seen Westland avenue and transformed into a gay, electric-lighted, busy center from a place sporting the few necessary shops for a thinly inhabited district. The change had transpired within ten years. The families were not, and had never been, intimate—the daughters made up for every deficiency of their parents in that direction.

"Where's Bertha?" asked Mr. Merrit as he sat down to dinner.

She and Dolly went out together about an hour ago," answered his wife.

"Time she was home," grumbled Merritt, not unpleasantly.

"Didn't think it worth while to let dinner get cold."

"She'll probably come along when she's a mind to," said Merritt, laughing.

"Oh, she's with Dolly."

"Wouldn't trust either of them," commented Merritt, trustfully.

They continued their dinner without much conversation, except an allusion to Bertha's new sweater coat and the cost of it. No difficulty arose over that. The telephone bell rang; the maid entered.

"What is it, Olga?" asked Mrs. Merritt.

"Miss Berta. She say she eat by Miss Dolly."

"Say when she'd be home?" asked Merritt.

"Bout tan," said Olga, departing.

"I'll go for her," said Bertha's father.

"Nonsense, Henry! Nothing can happen to her. Let the child learn to be independent."

"I don't like her being on the street alone after dark."

"Oh, you men!" laughed Mrs. Merritt. "Nothing can happen to Bertha in Park Place."

"Nothing ever does happen in Park Place," said Merritt. He walked into the living room and picked up the evening paper. He did not go for Bertha, was in bed when she returned at ten.

A scene almost identical took place in the Wilcox home, except that about nine-thirty Mrs. Wilcox said:

"I wish you'd walk down for Dolly, Matt."

"Not much. Last time I did it she begged to stay all night."

"Yes, I know—but—"

"You're not worrying about Dolly, Missus?"

"No, but—oh, Matt, such dreadful things do happen."

"Not in Park Place."

"Here she is now," said Mrs. Wilcox, relieved. The door opened and in walked Dolly.

"Hello, daddy!"

"Have a good time?" asked Wilcox.

"Always have a good time at Bertha's."

"Good dinner?" inquired her mother.

"Splendid!"

And Dolly gave the Merrit menu from soup to nuts. She did not mention chocolate. The necessity did not exist.

From Park Place to the shopping district of which the store of Lord, Moore & Co. is the boasted pride is a little journey. Bertha did not rise until nine, did not reach the great outfitting establishment until after eleven. She went directly to the sweater department.

Sweater coats she found galore, scarlet, emerald green, sulphur yellow, delft blue, gray and all shades of all colors—except rose-color. Nothing, however, but rose-color would answer for Bertha. Despairing of a sale, out of forward stock to be pushed, the saleswoman departed, to return shortly with two sweaters of the desired and very desirable color over her arm. One of the coats fitted Bertha as if knitted for her.

But the buttons! Platter buttons would never do, no matter how amber. She must have buttons like Dolly's, oblong buttons cut in facets. Easy enough. Simply take buttons off one coat and sew them on another. Lord, Moore & Co. is nothing if not accommodating. But it would take time.

"Very well," said Bertha, "I'll go up to the tea-room for lunch."

"I'll have the sweater ready when you get back," said the saleslady.

A handsome, matronly woman, expensively and quietly dressed, stood fingering the woolen goods while Bertha made her purchase. She seemed much amused at the girl's persistence, her knowing what she wanted, her getting it.

"Anything I can show you, madam," said the saleswoman as Bertha left.

"Oh, no; just looking," said the shopper. She lingered a moment, priced an article or two, then took her way towards the elevators.

When Bertha took her seat at a table for two in the spacious and splendid tea room on the sixth floor of Lord, Moore's, she was noticed by two women who knew her by sight very well indeed. They also knew Dolly. Two such pretty girls could not pass their doors daily without attracting attention. And neither was unobservant. In fact they loitered over their luncheons to observe the women round about them, their dress, and the little things that women find time to estimate and talk about. Bertha did not know of the existence of either Mrs. Bob White or Mrs. Tom Black, but those ladies were too well acquainted with Mrs. Merritt's published activities not to know where the girl lived and a good deal about her. The Merrits, the Whites, the Wilcoxs, the Blacks, had the same milkman, iceman, butcher and grocer. The Merrit's Olga and the Wilcox's Frieda were sociable creatures.

A handsome, matronly, expensively and quietly dressed woman came down the soft-carpeted floor of the tea room. She looked about, and though there were vacant tables, she seated herself opposite Bertha. The ladies across speculated as to who she might be; "was she an aunt or something? She had the Mrs. Merrit in-the-eye-of-the public look, or—?"

"Don't believe the girl knows her at all," said Mrs. White. "They haven't spoken."

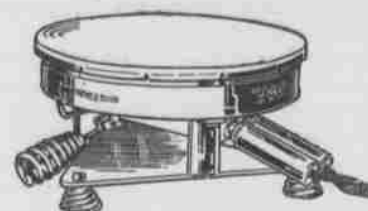
"Wonder what's the matter with her?" queried Mrs. Black as the woman dropped two effervescing globules into the glass of water which the waitress brought. Bertha ordered another glass for herself. She brought a decanter and poured it.

"Rheumatism, I guess," said Mrs. White. "You never can tell about those large, healthy looking women." . . . "Platinum?"

"Make 'em of German silver so you can't tell."

Which referred to the large lady's hand bag, which, with her gloves, lorgnette, etc., lay on the edge of the table between herse and Bertha. The woman reached for the salt—clumsily for one so graceful. The bag fell to the floor. Bertha

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